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SAIGON SHOWS SOME SURPRISE BUT ACCEPTS THE ARRANGEMENT

By our Special Correspondent, Jean-Claude Pomonti

Saigon, January 17 - The announcement Thursday evening of the impending opening of the Paris conference provoked here neither enthusiasm nor disappointment but a certain surprise. Indeed, after the farewell address of President Johnson political circles did not think that an agreement could be reached before his successor took over the Presidency, and above all before the new President would have re-defined his position on the conflict.

The decision which has just been taken should not, however, arouse any disturbances. Since the sending of a delegation to Paris, local politicians have left the government a free hand to negotiate the modalities of the opening of the first meeting of the conference. On this point, then, it was known that agreement would be reached sooner or later on a round table, subject to certain artifices to satisfy the sensitivities of this or that group. On the whole with two small rectangular tables showing symbolically, to its eyes, the existence of two camps, the Saigon government can take advantage, before its own public opinion and above all before its adversaries in the negotiations, of a compromise vague enough to permit General Thieu to find in it respect for the principles to which he appears so attached.

It is true that in abandoning certain demands - - flags, name plates, and above all a four-sided table - - the other side has made rather significant concessions. The local authorities can always say that the representation of the NLF does not have a status equal to that of Saigon. Finally, many people believe that the discussions are going to be lengthy and do not worry very much about the events to come.

The partisans of a rapid negotiation, notably the "pacifist" religious groups, can only approve a decision that they have called for for a long time, but which they have not shown themselves capable of imposing on the government. Still poorly organized, and sometimes divided, they have chosen since the beginning of the month to adopt a "wait and see" position. Thus, they have been to some extent overtaken by events. But in the future they will be able to campaign, or envisage more serious campaigning, for a cease-fire, which seems to remain the most immediate objective of several of them.

People wonder also what the attitude of the soldiers will be. President Thieu took the precaution, before sending a delegation to Paris, of launching a campaign of explanation in the ranks of the army.

It remains true that here (i.e. Saigon) the problems of substance will probably take precedence over the questions of procedure. On this subject, a first indication of the attitude which Saigon might adopt was given to us Thursday by Tran Ngoc Chau, the Secretary General of the Lower House and one of the leaders of the pro-government Unity Bloc. "We must envisage," he



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said to us, "direct conversations with the NLF and, in a later phase, the formation of a coalition government in which the NLF will have minority representation." A former Lieutenant Colonel in the infantry - - he resigned from the Army after his election - - Mr. Chau judges that since victory is "impossible" in present circumstances, and defeat is "inconceivable", it is necessary at least to recognize the "existence" of the Front, above all since Hanoi declares that it is not competent to speak for the Front.

This Deputy advocates, then, a settlement in three phases. In a first period, the Front would be invited to "designate" representatives to the National Assembly, "on condition that they not be notorious communists". The modalities of this operation could be the subject of secret negotiations between Saigon and the NLF. During a second period, the members of the Front would be invited to participate in the general elections provided for in the present Constitution for the renewal of the two Houses. Should they present themselves as individuals or under the label of the Front? Mr. Chau judges that this question should be discussed.

Finally, in a third period, Hanoi and Saigon could discuss "the achievement of unification".

"A cease-fire must be attained before the application of this plan. It could very well be the subject of a secret negotiation", adds Mr. Chau, who specifies that "the formation of a coalition government with a minority participation of the NLF should take place before the second phase, that is to say before the general elections take place."

Coming from Central Viet Nam, Mr. Chau is considered one of the most thoughtful leaders of an Assembly which is often accused of playing a negative role. It is probably not by chance that his statement - - as well as the announcement of the opening of the Paris conference - - comes several days after the end of the parliamentary session and two months before the next one. He expects, he told us, a favorable reception from the Americans. "If the NLF states that it is not Communist", he explained to us, "nothing in the Constitution forbids it being considered an opposition group". A former director of the pacification cadres, Mr. Chau calls himself "firmly anti-Communist" and his previous statements of his position prove it. "But", he adds, "admitting the existence of the Front will permit the formation of a unity against it". This is what he intends to explain over radio and television before confronting the next parliamentary session.

Mr. Chau refused to comment on the reaction of Hanoi and of the NLF to his proposals. It is nevertheless the first time that an influential personality, considered close to President Thieu, has put forward concrete proposals which could eventually serve as a basis for discussion.

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